

Never Run From a Sikh—An Adventure Tale—By H. Bedford-Jones

"HERE'S the place and here's the man," said Fortescue when he and Maitland left the sedan chair to await their return and climbed toward the tiny bungalow on the hill.

Maitland, after his usual habit, said nothing. His coldly efficient eyes missed nothing of the scene before them, and narrowed slightly, as though in scorn.

Before the little house stood the man whom they had come to seek—Rao Singh, sometime rissaldar of his majesty's Eighth Sikhs, and now, by reason of a crippled leg sustained in Mesopotamia, a retired gentleman, who lived in his little Malayan bungalow and devoted himself to brushing his uniform, keeping his medals bright and doing a bit of shooting. Rao Singh had knotted his long rope of uncut hair, and now placed his skullcap over the lump. Taking one end of the twelve-yard turban between his teeth, he began to wind with deft, cunning movements. He wound the cloth about his head, an inch in width and a foot in diameter, and adjusted it over the turban. Then he turned to his visitors with a salute and a smile.

"A LORDLY man, this Sikh—six feet two under his turban, a tight-curved black beard over his massive mouth and chin, white ivories untouched by betel-paste, and a wealth of proud, dignified character in his face. A Sikh loses not his dignity, and Rao Singh was a Sikh of the very blood of Guru the master."

"I have a chit for you from the resident, Rissaldar," said Fortescue. He produced a letter and extended it. Rao Singh tore it open and glanced through the contents, then came to attention and saluted.

"Fortescue Sahib, I am no shikhar, but I can take you into the hills where you can find tiger."

Fortescue shook hands and turned. "This is my companion, Maitland Sahib, who accompanies me in search of the striped one."

Maitland bowed slightly, coldly, then lighted a cigarette and turned toward the view from the mountain-side. For a space Fortescue and Rao Singh discussed the proposed hunt. The keen intuition of the rissaldar scented two things—first, Fortescue Sahib was an army man of his own type and kind and was less interested in tigers than in getting the expedition off; second, Maitland Sahib knew little of the country, displayed little interest in the game or his companions and appeared to treat Fortescue and everything around him with a cold, aloof courtesy which was repellent rather than attractive. He was not the type whom Fortescue should have chosen for a hunt, in the rissaldar's opinion.

"Largely ethnological," answered Fortescue. "A peculiar weapon of the people, a survival from the primal days. They are trained from childhood to throw the ring like a boomerang, or on the same order. I've seen one, well sharpened, take a man's head off. One could have sworn that he meant to kill Maitland, then, after answering a direct question from Fortescue, he glanced curiously at Rao Singh."

"These Sikh troops," he said, ignoring the rissaldar, "seem almost to wear that ring around their turbans. What's the reason?"

"Largely ethnological," answered Fortescue. "A peculiar weapon of the people, a survival from the primal days. They are trained from childhood to throw the ring like a boomerang, or on the same order. I've seen one, well sharpened, take a man's head off. One could have sworn that he meant to kill Maitland, then, after answering a direct question from Fortescue, he glanced curiously at Rao Singh."

"Quite," said Maitland, nodding coldly. For a bare instant his efficient, slightly scornful eyes rested upon Fortescue. There were hatred and fear and frozen fury in their gleaming depths. One could have sworn that he meant to kill Maitland, then, after answering a direct question from Fortescue, he glanced curiously at Rao Singh."

"Quite," said Maitland, nodding coldly. For a bare instant his efficient, slightly scornful eyes rested upon Fortescue. There were hatred and fear and frozen fury in their gleaming depths. One could have sworn that he meant to kill Maitland, then, after answering a direct question from Fortescue, he glanced curiously at Rao Singh."

"By Gur!" he said to himself, "there is something strange about this hunting."

And in this he was quite correct.

SOME days after Fortescue and Maitland departed on their search for stripes I at the residence of another business man, the subject of the two men came up between us. The resident shook his head sadly. "You've heard something of it, then? It could not be entirely hushed up, of course—a sorry affair, 'pon my word! You've not met the men?"

"Fortescue, yes," I answered. "I met him two months ago in Penang. He struck me as a very fine sort of chap. I know the rumors, but I disbelieve them absolutely."

The resident nodded. "Most people do disbelieve them—that's the devil of it! The whole affair will come out."

"At this I sat up. 'You don't mean the rumors are true?'"

"Not half the truth, old chap. This bounded Maitland, now—know him?"

I shook my head. The resident opened a box of cheroots and ordered drinks.

"Maitland is Fortescue's cousin and help number one. There was something between the two men at home during the war. I'm not sure about the details, but I fancy that Maitland married the girl who should have married the other chap. Fortescue was a prisoner and reported dead—one of those beastly messes, you know. So when things quieted down, Fortescue applied for exchange and came out here."

"But—" I interrupted. Then ceased my questioning. The resident was going ahead.

"That's really behind the whole jolly row," he continued frowningly. "But excuse me, please. There's another story mixed in with it—a young subaltern down at Penang. As to that, I know nothing; can only draw inferences. At all events, there was a beastly misapprehension of funds, and Fortescue tried to hush it up—paid up the account himself. The boy late to prevent this thing being discovered. Since he had settled up, he was presumably to blame."

"Oh!" I said. "You meant that the subaltern—"

"My dear chap, I mean only what I say—that I know very little." The resident made a deprecating gesture. "I know the facts as far as I know them. There's a fortnight to spare at present before the thing be-

comes public property. Maitland happened to be out this way, he has a post in Singapore—and being in what you Americans called the auditing bureau of the Straits government."

The resident paused, slightly confused. He was trying to hedge, trying to conceal something. Being an Englishman, it came hard. He was trying to hold back something, and was making a mess of it. I decided to help him out.

"You mean," I said carelessly, "that Maitland dropped out of the fact that Fortescue had presumably looted the exchequer and came up to see about it and help his cousin out of the hole? Very proper of him, I'm sure."

The resident looked a bit distressed—not over my Americanisms, which he understood perfectly, but over my deductions.

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"I'm afraid not." And I sighed. "However, I happen to know Rao Singh might be well, and—"

"Besides," persisted the resident, still thinking about my suggestions, "Fortescue can't possibly evade the exposure, you know. It means dismissal from the service and disgrace. It is good cricket, of course, chivalric and all that, but I'd hold another chap when one has nothing to expect from life. None the less, Fortescue could not—"

"Oh, tut!" I said, laughing. "Look here! You like gambling, and I'll give you a real wager—you to bet on fact and I to bet on Rao Singh and poetic justice. Fifty rupees that Fortescue comes out on top. That's enough to be a bet and not enough to be gambling with the life and decency of a man."

"Done!" said the resident. "But I am sorry that you wager on so slight a ground."

"Slight!" I repeated. "Slight! Why, man, you think Fortescue is going to drop out? Never! You simply

be at peace with myself. That would be impossible were I to be a moral coward."

Maitland shrugged his shoulders, took a cigarette from the open case on the table, and went outside the hut.

THE instant Fortescue was alone his manner changed. He threw aside his cigarette, gave himself to relaxation. A slow flush crept across his sun-touched features.

"He dared not name her!" he muttered. "He did that before, the swine! He must have guessed that I would have been glad of the excuse to kill him. He guessed it, and now he will give me no excuse at all."

His nostrils dilated. He held out his hand, and the strong fingers curved in a grip as though to crush some unseen object between them. Then he relaxed again, a bitter smile curling his lips, and shook his head slowly. One gathered that this man

had done much more than merely master and control himself. He had mastered and controlled his passions and his impulses.

Maitland meanwhile was standing outside the hut, rapidly smoking his cigarette, staring at the village with unseeing eyes, shaking his head in an access of emotion. From his lips, usually so impassioned and cold, a low stream of oburgations fled into the darkness.

At length he became silent, poised, motionless for a moment. He took from his pocket a knife and two cartridges. In the starlight he worked for a space over the cartridges, then turned again into the hut, whistling as he entered.

When the door closed after his tall figure, a motionless shadow detached itself from the corner of the hut and moved forward to the doorway where Maitland had stood. The starlight glinted upon a wide steel ring encircling a grotesquely shaped turban. For a little, Rao Singh crouched, fumbling in the dust, then found a small whistle, and stood erect, "By Gur!" he whispered wonderingly. "This sahib has a strange fashion of hunting!"

He moved back slowly, thoughtfully, into the shadows and merged again with them, squatting on his heels. He produced a small tin and a small whistle, and stood erect, "By Gur!" he whispered wonderingly. "This sahib has a strange fashion of hunting!"

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